

## Not by Bread Alone

Maria Elsa da Rocha

She had frizzy hair and eyes that seemed grafted from a European: blue with grey asphalt tints.

The womenfolk on the bus to Mapuçá chatted away, cursing the weather and ribbing the cleaning boy. Baskets upon baskets piled up in the space beside the driver.

All of a sudden, Pulquéria screeched:

“Watch it, *ânê*! Don’t you dare put anything on my basket!”

“What’s it to you?” jeered the woman about to place down her own. “Nothing’ll get damaged.”

“Of course it will!”

“Rubbish! You don’t own this bus, do you?”

The women sitting around them chuckled. A moment’s silence followed, as they shot litigious glances at the baskets from the corners of their eyes. From their weary bodies came the earthy smell of life.

“Won’t let up, *ânê*. The cheek of it!”

She snapped:

“But, *saibinni*, I’ve got eggs in there! Eggs break under a weight like that!”

“Well then, move the eggs. Put those eggs somewhere else! *Tatiâm cad!*”

Now, in unison, the women chorused:

“That’s it! Tell her to take out her eggs!”<sup>1</sup>

Giggles . . . With deliberate cheek, they told the bus boy:

“Tell her to take out her eggs!”

Oh, that was too much! Pulquéria was like dry pine needles blazing on a summer’s night! She shouted and thundered. The air crackled with obscenities.

“You lot listen to me. It’s not my time to take out eggs. And when I did, it was with the cockerel from my own backyard.”

With that, she got up and went to remove a small package from her basket.

A mischievous breeze tickled the faces of everyone but Pulquéria’s adversary. That quip about the backyard cockerel had left the woman poleaxed. In a strangled attempt to put across her own, entirely justified point of view, she turned to a neighbour and asked:

“What do you think, *manã*? Is that something you put in a basket? Eggs? *Saibá* . . .”

There was a moment of near silence after the driver roared:

“Hold your damn tongues or get the hell off my bus!”

At Mapuçá fair, each vendor occupies a specific place, which depends on the goods for sale. Pulquéria went to sit with her precious rice in the row for vendors of that grain. She was crestfallen! All the women who had crossed the river on that same ferry had it in for one another. Whatever happened to decency? What was the point of being honest and hardworking? So she’d made that crack about the cockerel. Served that woman right! It was to refresh her memory! What did that hussy reckon, that they’d all forgotten about her fling with the postman while her husband was out on the high seas? Checking her, Pulquéria? Who did she think she was? Some woman who struck it rich with the black gold of contraband . . . Her son was a doctor? Congratulations! Congratulations to her foreign daughter-in-law too! She ran her fingers through the little heap of rice and thought with pleasure about her own future daughter-in-law. *Odgim*, traditional alms for the poor . . . How lovely . . . Someone came up and asked how much she wanted for her lemons:

“One rupee”.

“One rupee for four lemons?”

“Please . . .”

“Huh! You can keep them!”

And off went the *vestidcan*.

The sun was scorching. In its hot yellow rays the figures around her, though human, looked like faded illustrations. Pulquéria could bear the heat on her curly head no longer. She had sold all her rice. Now she just had to shift those lemons! She smiled inwardly: what a fuss she’d kicked up . . . No, they hadn’t been eggs at all!

“Pulquer-*manã*, glad to find you here!”

“*Saibá*, what’s happened?”

“Didn’t you get the letter?”

“No. What letter?”

“*Bapiá!* That’s what I wanted to tell you on the bus. It seems . . . Well, Santan . . . Our Marçal . . .”

Had Pulquéria heard right? Was the woman just getting her own back?

With difficulty Pulquéria managed to take a small breath. Everything blazed around her, a raging flame consuming her poor dreams and idle hopes.

The other woman retreated stammering consolatory monosyllables, while her startled eyes took in the lemons . . . So they were lemons, not eggs? *Chi*, that devilish woman! Sometimes, the sins of the mother . . . She crossed herself, before melting into the kaleidoscopic throng of the bazaar. Pulquéria saw everything around her spin in small, coloured whirls . . . Her Santu with smallpox, far off in their *cudd* in Bombay . . . She wrapped up her lemons and stuffed them in the empty basket. Her vision still swirling, she staggered out to the bus stop.

Her heart flew to her darling boy! Flashes of zinc shot from her eyes and sliced through the dust dancing in the torrid air.

Did she get to Bombay? Of course! Women like her would gallop over the Ghats, from foot to crest and down again, just to stroke the face of an ill son with their rough-skinned hands. That's what they're like . . . Mountains of courage and dedication. For their children no sacrifice is too great.

She approached a passer-by and thrust before his eyes the address of the *cudd*, written in block letters. The man, a Parsee, politely gave her directions, more by gestures than in words, and didn't pass up the chance to curse the Government for constantly changing the names of the streets.

She followed his instructions exactly. Nothing along the way registered. Not the haughty dome of the Museum, not the hotel where her son-in-law worked and where she had visited him so many times. . . Only the wild palm where a flock of pigeons once roosted and which marked the entrance to the *cudd*. She toiled up its dirty, rickety wooden staircase.

What would she find? A blistered body? A lifeless face? She leant on the bannister so as not to fall . . . for the umpteenth time! Not a bite of food for two days! The long, distressing journey from Goa to Bombay had seemed endless. She had a lump in her throat all the way from sobbing. A battered image of Padre Agnelo was the only dyke protecting her against that tide of unparalleled anguish. A mother's heart is never wrong! Her son wasn't past saving! She would care for him, like when he was a baby and that awful attack of scabies had made his hair fall out. Overcome, she collapsed there and then and burst into a heart-rending wail. Someone appeared at the top of the stairs, his head wrapped in a white towel.

"I thought so. Pulquer, is that you *mu-gô*? *Saibá*, have you just come from Goa? *Agô*, for God's sake, calm down . . . He's fine, they're . . . *Ptchut*, *Bapiá*, calm down . . ."

She just lifted her head and, with her arms outstretched, cried imploringly: "Forsu-*irmão*, where is he? Where is my son? Where is my son, *irmão*?"

Forsu was trembling! Frailty? Dismay? The lot!

"*Agô*, easy now, come in . . . He was in a bad way, yes . . . but . . ."

Pulquéria wanted to bolt off in all directions, leap tall buildings, stop the traffic, barge through crowds and burst into hospitals, to tug great personages by their gowns and plead, beg: "*Babá*, *puthá*, come, now, please save my child, I'll kiss the soles of your shoes, I'll lick your feet, I'll . . ." *Devá*, *Devá*, *what have you done with my boy!*

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In a low, dingy cot Santana Castelino, son of Pulquéria, lay alone, convalescing from the terrible bout of smallpox that had mainly affected his ears. His anaemic digits gingerly fingered the ravaged area. With every tiny hole he felt, furtive tears sprang to his blue eyes as he mouthed the blessed name "mother"!

Every now and again images of his first day in Bombay came to mind. That monstrous city had swallowed him up in its gaping maw. That's right! How dire it had all seemed. When, exhausted from his journey, he had sat at the little window of the *cudd* and looked out at the blue sky, the same vault that sheltered Goa, the city . . . that city had sneered at him, stretched out its yawning mouth even wider, looked scornfully down from the eyes of its sky-scraping towers, loomed over him in the reinforced concrete of its imposing buildings. Yes, it had mocked him in the streets below that teemed with ant-like people! Amid the welter of strange languages, he'd heard it say "if I wanted, if I wanted, boy, I could snap my jaws shut and crush you all like stones in a quarry!" He shivered and withdrew from the window. Those poor wretches in the *cudd* . . . What could they do? Forsu had waited a good year for the call! Santu's father too, until a decision had been made on their situation. Forsu would cook, his father manage the *cudd's* accounts. Both would eat and sleep for free. Poor things! It was to Forsu-*titio* that Santan owed his few moments of pleasant memory on that first night. Though unwell, he had perched on a pile of suitcases and coaxed some beautiful *dupodas* from his violin! They had concluded with a hymn to Saint Francis. How lovely! The hymn in unison, the *dulpodas* on the violin. Of course it left an almost bitter taste in Santan's mouth too, a trace of ineffable sadness, of lives gone unfulfilled. Were those people of the *cudd* fated only to suffer?

The single glass of spirits passed from hand to hand. Forsu-*titiu* tucked his violin under his arm and, in turn, drank a gulp and toasted to Santan's success . . . Nonsense! What chance of success did they have? Not a hope! Dismal failures, that's what they were . . .

After the music, they peppered Santan with questions:

"Santuleá, when's our *fiesta*? What about the angels? The *jonos*? Did you go out prawn fishing?"

He answered each inquiry as best he could. A leaden tiredness now weighed upon his eyelids.

They slept on mats on the floor, which they stretched out after tidying away the cases they had used for chairs.

They were woken early next morning by the dockside sirens. In the grey gloom, he saw his father crouching beside Forsu-*titiu*.

"You say you've taken a purgative, Forsu?"

"Yes, first thing I staggered out and woke the soda man. I drank it straight down, in the street. *Shi babá*, I feel so cold and shivery!"

"Don't be scared, it's *bet*!"

Santan didn't know who "she" was until later . . .

His father rushed to consult a Muslim named Mamu and brought back some powders to be taken mixed with honey. It was he who would care for the invalid. On the second day, blisters began to form. Five in total, they said. On the third day, Forsu was hale and hearty again, the smallpox now nothing more than a vague memory in the form of five dark little marks.

Everyone in the *cudd* laughed at Forsu, for getting variola at his age. To give thanks they sung a *ladainha*. It was beautiful! With candles lit on an improvised altar, suitcases arranged like a flight of steps, on high a panel bearing the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the *ladainha* rang out in a mix of contraltos and powerful bass voices. Their *Cor Jesu* transported a corner of beloved Goa to that attic room on Rampart Road.

Santan didn't want to be a wimp, but the truth was that very afternoon his head had begun to weigh a ton. He told Forsu, to whom he was closest.

"*Enb?*"

Everyone took fright. He was the youngest amongst them, the baby of the *cudd*, uncle's son! Whatever could be wrong with him?

His father quietened them down. It was nothing, just the flu!

Scalding water on his feet and hot towels . . . How those remedies made Santu suffer! And then? After that, he could remember nothing. Only waking up about a week ago in that cottage. He smiled. How could he die so far from home? A well-known voice sounded out, filling the space around it. In the doorway loomed the familiar figure of the doctor.

"*Arê*, what is it? *Fort mu-rê?*"

"Doctor", stammered Santan.

"Doctor . . . Doctor . . .", you lot make a mess of things and then . . ."

Dr Castelino's booming voice only grew in volume as he moved away. Now it carried crystal-clear from the wing opposite.

Even when overburdened at work the doctor would visit the cottage. With eyes tired of medical notes, he considered the young, cobalt gaze which had been so mistreated by that damn smallpox. And as he did so, his heart melted like tarmac under the midday sun. A nostalgia came to him in that blue regard. He, Dr Castelino, could find no solution, no . . . How could those people in the *cudd* get on in life? It was impossible! Well, what about him? Wasn't he a child of the *cudd*? Wasn't he now a renowned man of medicine? Who could say? His comfortable life in that vast city . . . He had already represented his country at more than a dozen specialist conferences . . . but was he fulfilled? No! No! A thousand times no! He had thought a white spouse would bring him security, help him set aside his complexes, and so had married a European. Nothing! When Motês Castelino had woken him in the middle of the night with his panicked telephone call, he had rushed out determined to liquidate that *cudd* and all who lived in it. With an axe if need be he would remove that rabble who lived there in bestial conditions, suffering all sorts of privations . . . he would demand that the Health Services . . . Ah, this time . . . This time he would do it! But, as he made his way up that filthy staircase, his irate stare passing blindly over those present, furiously sweeping the room . . . how odd, *ânb?* Full to bursting. Not just covered surfaces, but in volume! The Padre José almanac, oh, and a violin hung from the roof, without space to fit anywhere else . . . God! One by one his memories returned, like drops of dew to a parched throat: the tamarind tree below the whitewashed cross, rosaries, *ladainhas*, the fine drizzle . . . Him as a

boy, his *malcriado* finger tracing his name in the dust on the Principal's old Ford: "Jacó", as the gang called him.

"So who's ill, you bastards?"

They were startled and silent.

"Who's ill, you bastards?" he repeated, his anger mounting.

Santu's father took a step forwards and stammered:

"It's my son, Marçal. He's fresh up from Goa . . ."

He was only Marçal to the members of the *cudd*. Marçal, the son of Camil Marian. Two candles lit his swollen face. Delirious with fever, he babbled on about Athawale's algebraic equations.

"God, the worst sort of pox, black pox, octopus eye!", the doctor boomed. "You bastards, were you going to leave him here? Do you want to kill him? You *begarins*! What were you going to do, you lungi-wearing snake-charmers?"

He reeled off a rosary of insults both well worn and improvised. Swearing all the while, he made his way down the stairs to a nearby phone booth and summoned an ambulance in a stentorian voice: What? There aren't any? None available? His fist slamming against the partition must have made the operator at the other end of the line tremble, for an ambulance arrived five minutes later.

Under the limitless protection of Dr Castelino, Santu was transported to that low bunk in the isolated cottage, where he regained his strength.

In the *cudd*, the tiny mole-like eyes of Forsu darted back and forth between Pulquéria and the door . . . He felt too weak to calm that injured lioness. Alone and vulnerable, he disguised his emotion by picking off the linseeds stuck to his skin.

"Agô, this here, it's all so bad . . . Santulô was released today".

Pulquéria heard steps approaching and leapt to her feet.

"*Babá*!"

Her rough hands caressed her son's face again and again. Bending low, he threw himself into her arms and burst into tears.

Surprised to see his wife there, Motês kept his distance. He kept as far away as possible, in fear, as though he were the cause of his son's smallpox. It was as if mother and son formed a seamless whole. He had often felt like an intruder . . .

"*Babá*" she cried, a cascade of love filling an empty tank, her beloved son.

"*Mã!*"

She wiped her tears away with her *palau* and whispered:

"Shall we go home, *guê*? Back to Goa? Today?"

Pulquéria led her son to the window of the *cudd*. She felt his ears and tears sprang from her asphalt-tinted eyes, like streams of water across seedbeds.

"*Babá, razá*, my treasure, not a moment longer here!"

Two identical pairs of eyes glared at Motês, as if issuing a challenge!

Motês lowered his gaze and mumbled submissively:

"OK, as you wish."

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Amongst the people alighting from the raft, Sadassigad, the customs officer, saw a woman slip a package to a tall lad with a white towel wrapped around his face and head. Certain it contained contraband notes, Sadassigad sent his assistant to retrieve the item for inspection. The assistant did as he was told . . . But to Sadassigad's utter disappointment, when he opened the package, it only contained three lemons, linseed and various roots that had made the return journey untouched from Bombay to Goa and which, as a set, looked like the ingredients for some *jadu*, a spell . . . Sadassigad anxiously removed his hat and scratched his head. He spat betel and areca haphazardly all around him before promptly relaxing the regulations: they could go through with all their belongings. Nothing would be checked . . .

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

<sup>1</sup> One Konkani equivalent for 'laying' is 'to take out eggs', 'tãntiam cad' as above.

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**Maria Elsa da Rocha** (1924–2007) was one of the last Portuguese-language Goan writers. A primary school teacher by profession, her lyrical, intimist short stories, which often focused on female experience, appeared in the local press—particularly the newspaper *A Vida*—in the years following the integration of Goa into India, and were often broadcast on the last radio programme in Portuguese, All-India Radio's somewhat ironically entitled 'Renascença'. In 2006, a selection of her stories was published in Goa under the title *Vivências Partilhadas* [Shared Lives].